

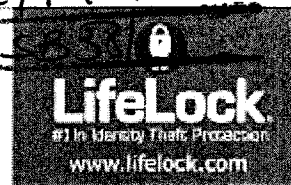
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Some places revisit immigration laws

By Emily Bazar, USA TODAY

Some states, cities and counties that plunged into the immigration debate are having second thoughts.

In Texas, Alabama and elsewhere, lawmakers have repealed or modified measures that cracked down on illegal immigrants or made English the official language. In Iowa and Utah, legislators are proposing similar reversals.

They cite various reasons, including the time and expense of fighting legal challenges, the cost of implementing the measures while tightening their budgets and the barrage of publicity and accusations of racism that come with such laws.

"For us to spend our time pitting neighbor against neighbor was a sacrilege," says Judith Camp, a city councilwoman in Oak Point, Texas, about 35 miles north of Dallas, who voted to kill the city's English-only resolution in December. The measure, adopted in 2007 on a 3-2 vote, was rescinded on a 3-2 vote. "We're just a tiny little city and we were getting a lot of negative publicity."

Muzaffar Chishti of the Migration Policy Institute, which analyzes immigration trends and policies, says some states and communities are "taking a more skeptical view" of immigration laws because of the legal costs and attention.

Most state and local laws that passed as federal reform failed remain in place, and some communities have mounted expensive campaigns to keep them. Farmers Branch, Texas, has steadfastly defended its ordinances despite legal challenges and public protests.

Chishti nonetheless expects more lawmakers to reconsider. "The cost of enforcing and defending these ordinances is enormous," he says. "The appetite for these things is going down."

Rob Toonkel, spokesman for U.S. English, a group that wants to make English the official language of the USA, counters that English-only proposals remain popular. Thirty states have such laws, he says, and there are far more states and communities proposing new laws than attempting to repeal them.

"The momentum is still on the side of assimilation," he says.

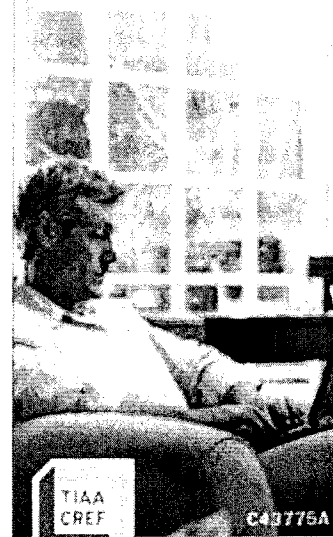
In Iowa, Democratic state Rep. Bruce Hunter wants to repeal a law that makes English the state's official language and requires most government documents to be in English. "It's really sent out the wrong message about the state of Iowa," he says.

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The Madison County (Ala.) Commission last August toned down a policy that requires businesses bidding for contracts to sign a pledge saying they don't knowingly employ illegal immigrants. The change was part of a settlement with a company that was late in submitting the pledge and did not win the contract.

The new pledge no longer says county officials can inspect contractors' personnel records.

"I would prefer it to be much stronger," says Commissioner Mo Brooks, author of the original policy. After studying legal opinions and federal law, though, the commission had no other choice, he says.

In Utah, two legislators, one from each party, have proposed delaying implementation of a law set to take effect in July. The bill's provisions include a requirement that government agencies check the legal status of new hires against a federal database.

Republican state Rep. Stephen Clark, author of one proposal, wants to delay the bill for a year to study the economic impact of illegal immigrants on the state.

Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr., a Republican, supports a delay, says spokeswoman Lisa Roskelley.

"We are in the process of making major cuts all across the board in government, including public education," says Clark, who puts the cost of implementing the immigration law at \$1.7 million. "We believe now is not the time to invest that money into this issue, especially when we don't know whether illegal immigration is a financial plus or minus to the state."

In Farmers Branch, legal bills haven't kept the city from sticking with its immigration law. Farmers Branch has spent \$1.6 million so far to fight lawsuits challenging its effort to prevent illegal immigrants from renting apartments and houses, says finance director Charles Cox. In one case, it will have to pay up to \$900,000 in plaintiffs' legal fees.

The \$1.6 million represents 1.5% to 2% of the city's budget, but residents approved one of its ordinances with more than two-thirds of the vote and want lawmakers to fight, Cox says.

"We can certainly find other uses for the money," he says. "By the same token, the residents have made their voices heard that this is a priority."

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